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Amid tensions, the church survives

Diane Scharper | Dec. 16, 2011

THE EMERGING CATHOLIC CHURCH: A COMMUNITY?S SEARCH FOR ITSELF
By Tom Roberts
Published by Orbis, $24

?Those who have left Catholicism outnumber those who have joined the church by an almost four to one margin.? That?s just one of the many gloomy statistics cited by Tom Roberts in *The Emerging Catholic Church*. As Roberts sees it, the church is in dire straits: U.S. Catholics are living through difficult times caused by various forces, including reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), demographic shifts, the women?s movement, gay-lesbian issues, enforced celibacy for priests and religious, and the inadequacy of the hierarchy, especially in regard to its handling of the sex abuse crisis.

Roberts approaches his subject with a journalist?s credentials. He?s not a religious. He?s not a theologian, a scripture scholar, a lay minister or even a sociologist. But with 17 years as an editor for the National Catholic Reporter and before that as a news editor for Religious News Service, he knows his subject. And he can tell a compelling story.

The book originated in the popular ?In Search of the Emerging Church? series that he wrote for *NCR*. Roberts seamlessly weaves numbers, facts, opinions, personal anecdotes and telling details as he compels the reader to turn the page. Although heavy with statistics, the book is readable because of Roberts? smooth writing style.

It?s unfortunate, though, that Roberts substantiates many of his facts with documents published several years ago. Why didn?t he incorporate some of the findings of *NCR*?s fifth survey of American Catholics (*NCR*, Oct. 11)? Doing so may have delayed publication but in this age of instant news it would have enhanced the accuracy and timeliness of this book.

The new *NCR* poll isn?t especially optimistic in its assessment either, although it does clearly note that the Catholic share of the American population has remained at a stable 24 percent because of Hispanic immigrants. To be fair, Roberts mentions the impact of Hispanics, but his observations tend to get lost in the dark outlook that permeates the book. Citing a study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2007), for example, that says the percentage of Hispanic Catholics is growing and transforming the church, Roberts dourly notes that numbers alone don?t guarantee a lasting effect.

Yet he bases his book on numbers, many from a 2008 Pew Forum report that shows that only 68 percent of those raised Catholic remain Catholic. In fact ex-Catholics (about 22.8 million) taken as a denomination would, he later speculates, ?make the second-largest [religious group] in the country behind the Catholic church, which lists 68.1 million members.?

Roberts? book is less about the future and more about the past, despite the title and the introduction. Both suggest that this book will present the new church rising from the wreckage of the old one. But only two of the 11 chapters in the book (not counting notes and index) concern an ?emerging church.?

One of the two discusses innovative practices in parishes in New Mexico and New Jersey. The other, Chapter 7, introduces Phyllis Tickle?s fascinating theory (from her book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*) that every 500 years a new form of Christianity emerges from the old. As Roberts explains it, the last ?hinge period? occurred during the Great Reformation, preceded by the Great Schism. Interestingly, these periods are characterized by anti-clerical sentiment as well as a searching for a new authority. If there?s a bright spot, it?s this section, which states this new form of Christianity will be purer and less ossified than the old one. If Roberts plans a sequel, he might do well to focus on the qualities of this new Christianity.

Most of this book, however, examines old headlines as it focuses on clerical efforts to, as Roberts sees it, highjack Vatican II reforms, as well as on the bishops? handling of the sex abuse crisis. Sex is a major topic -- as in discrimination against girls and women, the old boys? network, birth control, abortion, gay marriage, and priestly sexual abuse. Roberts has little good to say about the Roman Catholic hierarchy (especially Cardinals Bernard Law of Boston and Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia) whose actions seem to infuriate him.

Yet anger can make for engaging and passionate prose. As Roberts lists his gripes -- many written in perfect parallel rhythms -- the text takes on the hypnotic power of poetry, although not poetry?s preference for precision. Much of the book is painted in overly broad strokes, especially that part dealing with the bishops and the papacy of John Paul II. Roberts even admits that his statements about the hierarchy are ?without nuance and essential qualification.? One wonders why he makes them in the first place.

The book?s overall point, though, is well-taken: In the past half century, the church has been hemorrhaging members, money, reputation, vocations, schools, convents, rectories and church buildings because of the evil within and without. And given this scenario, what?s next for the church?

Roberts? ostensible purpose is to answer that question. He says he ?struggled with coming up with a neat list -- the 10 action items or the five-year plan ? for the Catholic who wants a clear idea of what works, or for the one ? [who] wants hard data on why he or she should stay.? But after spending a year and a half traveling the U.S. to find something of substance concerning an emerging church, he cannot.

He does find much that he considers wrong about the current church, especially the hierarchy. Even the sex abuse crisis, for Roberts, isn?t about sex or abuse. It?s about the hierarchy?s poor handling of the problem, a situation that will not significantly improve, Roberts suggests, in the foreseeable future.

Despite Roberts? pessimism, one has to say that, hammered by the media?s negative portrayal, in-fighting between liberals and conservatives over Vatican II, and the never-ending story of sex abuse, the Catholic church survives, and in certain areas, thrives.

That the church even exists amid such tensions seems miraculous and (not to put too fine a point on this) a sign of hope.

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The Big Tent of the Catholic Church

In his book The Emerging Catholic Church *(Orbis), Tom Roberts has reported on and observed the Catholic community?s ?search for itself.? In the following excerpt, he steps back from the reporting to offer this initial assessment:*

The positive note is easy to strike: Remove the Catholic church and the work of its people from our midst and life in this country would be dramatically different and far worse than it is. Pick a city and begin removing the ministries and work of Catholic parishes and of independent Catholics acting out of their understanding of the Gospel and of church social teaching. Take away, for instance, the center started decades ago by a couple of sisters that cares for children of poor, working, often single mothers; eliminate the agency in that same city that works against the greatest odds to tend to the increasing numbers of men and women being released from prison with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. There are sisters transforming whole blocks of urban blight by caring for the outcast, training people for jobs, rehabbing homes and running residential addiction rehab centers. Priests, sisters and lay leaders advocate from the Texas and Arizona borders to the immigration detention center in Newark [N.J.] on behalf of refugees seeking a new home and new lives. In some of the most desperate circumstances in this country an entirely ?new evangelization? goes on, not with words and dogma but with the power of presence and transformative love. Kids are being rescued from unimaginable settings and taught to reimagine their futures; art and literature, urban farming and new forms of community become part of the Resurrection story in hellish inner cities. Pick any city and start eliminating the soup kitchens and the clothing and food banks, the Catholic Charities-funded organizations that help people with everything from housing to counseling.

For all of the programs aimed at trying to bridge gaps among factions of the Catholic community, perhaps none finds a greater spread of common ground than JustFaith, the movement begun by Jack Jezreel. This is not a cheap grace program. Participants commit to months of meetings with a small group, a large volume of reading in the area of social justice, and a determination to confront some of the world?s more troubling problems from a Christian and Catholic perspective. The ?course? includes ventures into seldom-seen portions of local communities, those parts where the broken and marginalized dwell and are given support. Tens of thousands of Catholics across the country have tussled over months with the complexities of determining what is just and what might bring peace to situations ranging from the scene outside their front doors to mega problems of war, poverty, refugees and global environmental degradation. Many have found themselves changed forever in the process, made aware of things that they?ve not before pondered, from a point of view anchored deep in the Christian Gospels, and in the end empowered to act as they may never have imagined.

Multiply these few observations hundreds and hundreds of times across the country. Strip out all of that human-to-human activity and the prayer upon which it is built and that accompanies it. Life for many would become exceedingly bleak and hopeless.

The Catholic presence in the culture is significant. From the parish to the statehouse, from Congress to the Supreme Court, from the academy to Wall Street, there probably has never been a time in our country?s history when Catholic life has so robustly projected itself into American life.

And yet the feeling that all is not well is pervasive. There is an unsettled sense about what it means to be Catholic and what being Catholic means in the public realm. Catholic politicians are at odds with their bishops over public policy matters, particularly when it comes to political strategies involving abortion. Members of the hierarchy are at odds with each other, with Catholic institutions and with vowed religious. Having Catholic business leaders doesn?t guarantee a different kind of marketplace. Catholics by the thousands are involved in wars that successive popes have condemned. And with each new revelation of priest sexual abuse of children and of official cover-up, more credibility is drained from the hierarchical level. The divisions within the Catholic community are expressed in the most extreme ways in the blogosphere, which has opened a huge

venue for irresponsible, undocumented, irrational and unaccountable opinion and rumor-mongering. The attacks can be vicious and unrelenting, particularly from that element that John Allen has labeled ?Taliban Catholics,? self-appointed guardians of self-concocted measures of orthodoxy. The Big Tent of the Catholic Church strains today to contain it all.

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